

Wheaton's Challenge: Retain Soul In Revival

*Small, Ethnic Shops
Worry About Surviving*

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After a series of failed attempts to breathe life back into a downtown that had turned seedy, Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan promised at the start of this decade that he was going to "revitalize Silver Spring or die trying."

He used eminent domain to take over large swaths of land, threw an estimated \$350 million at redevelopment and got personally involved in wooing Discovery Communications Inc. and the American Film Institute.

Now, with the project nearly complete and Duncan (D) promoting Silver Spring's renaissance as he runs for governor, county officials are focusing attention a few miles north along Georgia Avenue. But this time, in Wheaton, their approach is starkly different.

Although they have taken some steps to spark Wheaton's transformation — Duncan and others actively pursued Macy's, which opened its first store in the county at the Westfield Shoppingtown Wheaton mall last year — officials say they are mostly trying to manage the growth that to a large extent is occurring without the intensive public resources that were poured into Silver Spring.

Stung by criticism that many small businesses were pushed out of Silver Spring as new ones were courted, county leaders also

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Wheaton Shops Worry About Being Pushed Out

WHEATON, From C1

say they are going to great lengths to preserve the family-owned shops that help make Wheaton one of the area's most diverse communities.

"Redevelopment that replaces small businesses and undermines the community is not revitalization," Montgomery County Council member Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring) said. "And that's one of the fundamental challenges of Wheaton."

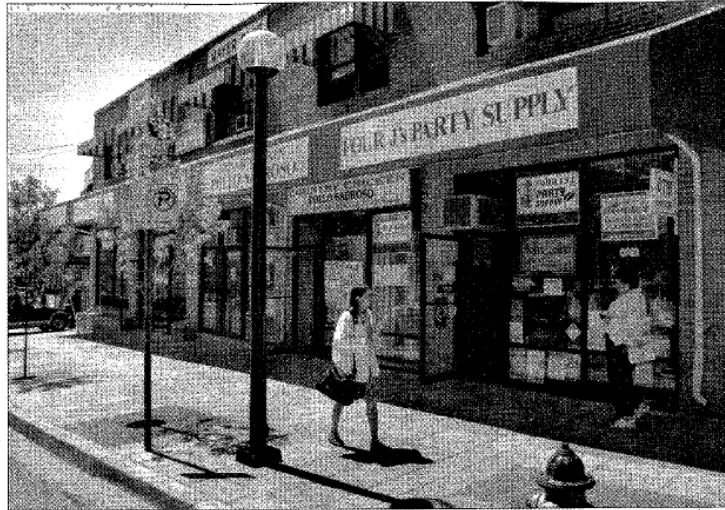
It wasn't too long ago that Wheaton watched Silver Spring's metamorphosis with envy, still trying to shake its reputation as a blue-collar suburb that was decaying because of crime and encroaching urbanization — an image reinforced by gang-related stabbings at the mall last summer.

Now, officials say they have been deluged by developers eager to come to Wheaton, which is attractive because of its Metro stop, active business community and the fact that there are few other places to grow in the county.

"They say, 'We hear things are pretty hot in Wheaton. Can you show us around?'" said Natalie C. Caputo, director of Montgomery's mid-county services center. About once a week, she said, a member of her staff gives developers a tour of Wheaton.

Yorlady Ramos has watched the community's transformation. In addition to the Macy's, a new housing development — the first in downtown Wheaton in 30 years — featured brownstones going for nearly \$700,000. And then a nightclub opened two doors from her party supply store, selling a citrus martini for \$9 and alerting customers: "Dress Code. Upscale Attire. Strictly Enforced."

Still, nothing drove home the changes more than when the man from the Latino Economic Development Corp. showed up to warn Ramos that redevelopment will mean higher rent, possibly higher than she can afford.



Montgomery County leaders say they are taking steps to preserve family-owned shops, such as the Latino-friendly Four F's Party Supply, that contribute to Wheaton's ethnic diversity. "Redevelopment that replaces small businesses . . . is not revitalization," council member Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring) says.